Interview with Frank E. Schmelzer

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

FRANK E. SCHMELZER

Interviewed by: Mike Springmann

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Q: This is Mike Springmann recording with Frank Schmelzer on Tuesday, December 1, 1992. Frank, can you talk to us a little bit about what possessed you to go into the Foreign Service? As I recall you were a biology major and interested in music at one time.

SCHMELZER: Yes, that is right. As a kid I had a great interest in music, but later on I got interested in the idea of becoming a doctor. While in college, I lost that interest as I broke more and more test tubes and spent more and more time on the science courses, instead of being able to read my 10,000 books.

I broke loose from this in my senior year and did a lot of auditing. One of the books that I read was Spengler's “Decline of the West.” This sort of struck my fancy for some reason. In the House that I was in at Harvard, Dunster House, Dick Park, was an authority on India. He suggested that I go to graduate school at the University of Pennsylvania to study in their South Asian program, which I did. I was there for one year studying Sanskrit, Hindustani, Indian history, etc.

After one year my GI Bill funds ran out so I had to go to work for a while. I went up to New York and worked in a couple of banks there. But by that point I was just marking time; I was interested in the Foreign Service because I wanted to go to India.

Given my background in biochemistry I thought it would be very difficult to pass the Foreign Service examination, so I joined the Foreign Service as a clerk. Sure enough my first assignment was in New Delhi. While there I studied on my own at night...history, economics, and government, things I knew I would need to pass the written exam. I also brushed up my German. I took the written exam there and passed it and then took the oral exam when I came back in 1955.

My first assignment as an FSO was in Frankfurt where I worked in the Refugee Relief Program. That was fascinating because you had a very quick introduction into all the trouble that people could get in to. Many of our visa applicants were those who had failed to get visas under the earlier refugee program.

Q: This would be refugees from the 1939 war being processed when, in the 1950s?

SCHMELZER: Yes. I was in Frankfurt 1955 and 1956. Because my German was quite good they made me the so-called Security Officer, which meant that I got all of the nasty cases...all the prostitutes, all the SS guards, all the drug addicts, suspected Communists. It was a very trying job but fascinating. I was quite sure one guy was a Communist agent so I sort of kept him in place for about a year by requiring additional documentation.

After that I had some more university training. This time it was courtesy of the State Department. First I had nine months of Hindustani at the Foreign Service Institute, then a year of university training at Berkeley consisting of more language and history, etc.

Then I went to Madras as a political officer. Here we begin to pickup another theme. This was in that period of our history in the Foreign Service when it was fashionable to believe that we had to know everything about everything. I was in the political section and I wanted

to stay on until the 1962 general elections. The result was that I stayed in Madras for four years.

I remember we made an assessment of every one of the constituencies in south India and there were approximately a thousand of them. We made a projection as to who was going to win in each one.

Q: These were the districts for the...?

SCHMELZER: ...For the 1962 general election. Most of these were for the state assemblies in the four states of south India, but they also included the members of Parliament that are elected from there to go to New Delhi.

Galbraith was Ambassador at the time. I remember the word from the Embassy was that he was wondering why we were going to all this trouble. Why not just wait until after the elections were over and read in the newspapers what had happened?

Well, of course, the answer to that is that if you adopt that more relaxed approach, then you don't know what the election results mean, whereas you do know if you have really been grubbing around beforehand. But I believe we were over-doing it at that time.

During this period in Madras I was fairly aggressive, perhaps overly so. The result was that at one time the Ministry of External Affairs in New Delhi sent a Diplomatic Note to the Embassy complaining about me. They said that I was being too aggressive in pursuing the Communists in south India. But that was not the real reason, I think. I think the reason I got their goat was that I discovered in one of my trips into southern Madras state that the Congress Party had kidnapped some members of the opposition party, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), or Dravidian Progressive Federation, and kept them sequestered while some of the local elections were going on so that the DMK, could not exercise its majority rights. And thus the Congress Party maintained their control of that

area. I made the mistake of letting one of the local officials know that I had that story. I think that was what was behind the Diplomatic Note.

Before I went out on tours I would write ahead and make appointments. On one of my trips to Kerala, where the Communist Party is very strong, I had written to make an appointment with the General Secretary of the Communist Party in that state and had no answer from him, but I went to see him anyway. I don't think he liked it.

Then one time while on tour in Andhra Pradesh I heard that Sanjeeva Reddy, President of the All India Congress Party was in his home. I am afraid I burst in on him and got him out of his bathtub. I was overdoing this.

But this raises an interesting story. Earlier, while I was in New Delhi, I think I came to the attention of the Communist Party. For one thing I was a Harvard man. Now I read one time that the KGB took out files on anybody who graduated from Harvard. I find that hard to believe because it would be excessive, I think, even for them. But there I was working as a clerk in the Embassy. I had all these friends in New Delhi. A lot of Indian Army officers. I used to give all these parties. Maybe I had a little more profile than I should have had for a clerk, particularly in the eyes of the Russians who used chauffeurs, etc. as their KGB agents.

One time I gave a large party. I had a lot of thirsty Indian friends and we decided to have some fun and give a “one million BC” party. So we had a greased flag pole, a couple of girls came in tiger skins, all men were stripped to the waist as they came in. I had a 40-gallon barrel of beer that had been sitting there in the shade for about a week so the hops would settle. Indian beer in the bottle was great, but in the barrel it wasn't good. The only people that would drink that stuff were the Indian Army officers. We had a dancing bear and a couple of roast pigs.

So we were having a pretty good time. As the men came in they stripped to the waist, put on a beard, and I gave them an earthen pot of this beer. This began to draw a crowd.

One of my Indian buddies and I were feeling no pain after a while and we went over to the crowd and grabbed this one little guy who was looking in at us. We just lifted him up over the fence, stripped him and made him drink a pot of this stinking beer.

Well, we shouldn't have done that. About three weeks later the Communist monthly, “The New Age” had a story about our party...”Culture of the Vulture.” It turns out that the little fellow that we had grabbed was the editor of that magazine and he didn't like it.

Q: Was there fallout in the Embassy about that?

SCHMELZER: No, and I thought there might have been, but there was not. They thought it was rather amusing.

I mention this because later, while I was in Madras sometimes some Indians would confuse me with somebody else from a sister agency. I looked somewhat like him. This was confusing to any Communist who might be following the scene. I also was very friendly with someone with a very sensitive position in one of the Indian Services and there was a very interesting arrangement I had with him. We were just friends.

Subsequently, an officer came out from Washington to look for somebody to be sent to Afghanistan. They wanted someone with a little pizzazz because it was difficult to operate in the police state environment there. Based on my record they chose me. So I went up Kabul.

Q: This is before the coup backed by the Soviets?

SCHMELZER: Oh yes. Well before that. I got there in 1963 and about a week or ten days after arriving Daud, the strongman, was out.

Q: Which Daud for the tape transcriber and those reading this later on?

SCHMELZER: I have forgotten his full title, but he was the Prime Minister and the cousin of the King. [From transcriber: Lt. Gen Sardar Mohammad Daud Khan] He was the strongman in the country and on this particular occasion he wanted to do something and threatened to resign if the King did not give him his way. Much to his surprise, on this occasion the King accepted his resignation and Daud was out. Then a reform government came in and soon all these Western educated Afghans who had been hiding came out of the woodwork to take over this new government. It really changed the atmosphere considerably. So slowly, little by little, it was much easier to operate in this new environment.

Q: I wasn't aware that Afghanistan at this time was a dictatorship.

SCHMELZER: Well, yes.

Q: I thought it was more relaxed and more along the lines of Iraq and...

SCHMELZER: No. Not under Daud. It was essentially a police state. The Afghans were often afraid to talk to foreigners. It was difficult to do the standard kind of reporting which was so easy to do in India.

Q: The King was essentially a figurehead?

SCHMELZER: He had been, but on this occasion he stepped forth and under his guidance the new government came in.

I was a bachelor again at that time and threw a lot of parties. I had been there for a short time when I met one Afghan at the International Club. He had been educated in the United States and it just turned out that he was the Director General of the Ministry of Interior. In other words he ran the police force, the secret police, the jail system. I mean, that man was well informed.

He had four friends, one of whom was dean of the law school, another was a vice president of a bank, another was a director of one of the departments in the Ministry of Commerce and a member of the extended royal family, and the fifth guy was the son of the one true wealthy industrialist in the country. These five guys were buddies and all hung around together.

Well, they started coming over to see me. I had booze and occasionally had friends come in, including Peace Corps volunteers. This came to the attention of the Russians and they used to complain to these guys. I was really surprised how ham-handed the Russians would be about this. They would say, “Why do you see Schmelzer? You no see Schmelzer no more.”

Q: This was the KGB from the Soviet Embassy?

SCHMELZER: Yeah. It turned out that one of these KGB officers was talking to them like this. The Afghans would tell me this. This was very interesting to me. Afghanistan at the time was, of course, a neutral country. Our role there was essentially working with our AID program, with the Peace Corps volunteers and with contracts through Pan American for Ariana Airlines and a very small military program which brought trainees to the United States for military training. Essentially what we were trying to do was to counter to some degree the overwhelming presence of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan.

Q: This is an extension of the same game the British and the Russians were playing in the last century.

SCHMELZER: Yes, that is right. Of course, working with us on our side of the ledger we had the Germans, the British, the Chinese and the Pakistanis. The Indians were playing their own game.

Q: When I was there they had Indian Army jeeps taking Russian kids to school.

SCHMELZER: Anyway, this particular KGB guy at embassy cocktail parties in Kabul would come up and start picking a fight with me. (According to the boys, he was the KGB chief in Afghanistan and probably the KGB chief for all of south Asia. He had been formerly in India and they had caught him with his hands in the cookie jar and they expelled him.) I could never understand why he kept doing this. It happened time after time. I would just stand there for a while and listen to him ranting on. Finally I would see maybe an Indonesian over there, or a Pakistani or Indian and I would say, “Hey” and get a few people standing around. Then I would interrupt this KGB guy and turn to an Indian and say, “By the way, I assume you know that you threw this man out of your country because he was caught with his hand in the cookie jar?” And the Russian would stomp away madder than hell. And he would do this all the time.

Then we began to get into a strange situation where we would have “friendly little parties.” Twelve officers from our Embassy and twelve officers from the Russian Embassy would get together about once a month or so. Now this was not being done elsewhere around the world.

Q: How large was the American Mission at that time? Was there just the one Embassy in Kabul?

SCHMELZER: The Embassy proper was probably about 30-40 people. With AID we probably had 200-300 people there. Our AID program was quite large and given the nature of the Afghan economy, we had to rely heavily upon technicians. Whereas in India, the economy was more advanced so we proportionately had a smaller group of technicians.

But somehow we had better relations with the Russians, perhaps because Afghanistan was a neutral country. Although we were in an adversarial relationship with them it didn't have the edge that it had in most other countries worldwide.

So we began to get together. One time the Americans would be the host and it would be at one of our homes, and then the Russians would be the host and it would be in their embassy...I presumed because it would be wired for sound and recorded.

Q: How large was the Russian Embassy at that point?

SCHMELZER: The Russian Embassy was very large. They had put in a new compound while I was there. It was so large, indeed, that some of the Afghans became rather apprehensive and wondered why they needed such a large compound. The only embassy in the physical sense that was comparable had been the British. The British Embassy, of course, had been used as an outgrowth of an imperial power. So the comparison, I think, must have made some Afghans uneasy.

About this same time I should say that I kept up relations with Taraki.

Q: Who is Taraki?

SCHMELZER: Nur Mohammad Taraki. In 1979 he suddenly emerged as the first Communist leader, prime minister in Afghanistan. I knew him because when I went to the Embassy in 1963, he was in the Embassy as a translator. He had been in India and liked Indian food. He had been in Washington as the press attach# in the Afghan Embassy. He and Daud did not get along. They hated each others' guts. When Taraki went back to Kabul from Washington, he told me he had left a letter with the New York Times implicating Daud in something or other. When he went back to Kabul he told Daud that the New York Times had such a letter and if anything happened to him, the Times would publish a scathing story. I don't know if this is true or not, but this is what he told me.

After the reform program had been in place a few months, Taraki felt it was safe to leave the employ of the American Embassy and he did. I kept in touch with him. About once a month I would drive down to the old part of town and park under a certain tree and throw open the back door of my Mercedes. He would climb in, lie down on the floor of the car

and then I would drive back to my house where the cook would have prepared a nice Indian meal and have left before Taraki and I arrived. I would park the car, close the gate and then he would be free to come into the house and the two of us would talk over the meal. Later I would give him a bottle of scotch and drive him back. I would let him out under the same tree in the old part of Kabul.

This guy was so well informed. I could prepare interesting airgrams, telegrams, etc. based on my discussion with him.

Q: Did he have an official position at this point?

SCHMELZER: Well, he had opened up a translation business. This was his cover for his political activity.

I knew he hated the royal family, I knew he had socialist leanings and wanted Afghanistan to advance in one hell of a hurry. But I did not know that he was forming the Communist Party of Afghanistan. Apparently no one else did either. The news that he was doing so only emerged later, when I was back in Washington.

Q: But he was giving you correct information on other things?

SCHMELZER: Yes. I don't think he was lying to me. He had wonderful stories, a sharp mind, and sources of information in many parts of the government.

Q: How did Washington and the Embassy receive your reports?

SCHMELZER: Well, they were very pleased that I had this great source of information.

As a result of knowing him and these other five people that I told you about, I was extremely well informed. It was incredible, particularly in a country that had been so difficult to operate in. I was doing quite well.

Well, at one of these parties with the Russians, I remember that this KGB guy finally got under my skin. I must say there was a lot of trouble over Berlin at that time...of course there had been for years. That was before we came to an agreement with the Russians on that subject. This was probably the spring of 1965. We had been talking about Germany and Berlin. I had had a little bit too much to drink and grabbed this guy by the necktie, rather close to his throat, and said, “Listen, you son of a bitch. You know what we are waiting for don't you? We are just waiting for a few Russian troops, three, two, one, to invade, to move into West Berlin. Then you know what is going to happen to your country, don't you? From Leningrad to Vladivostok not a blade of green grass will ever grow again. Your language will disappear from the earth...” My own eyes were too blood shot to realize it, but a couple of the people standing around were reasonably sober, and this guy actually turned white. I don't know whether he thought my position there was more elevated than it was, and that I was presenting a well-considered USG policy decision, but I do know that thereafter he didn't bother me anymore. Who knows, maybe this incident helped to save Berlin!

The next get together with the Russians was in their Embassy. I remember at one point—it was rather late in the evening and we were all rather far gone—looking around and seeing a big collection of empty vodka bottles at my end of that long table and realizing that there was no vodka in those bottles there I started pounding on the table. “What, no vodka in this Russian Embassy?” Two or three of the Russians, drunk as they were, tottered to their feet and went down to the cellar and came back with more vodka. Afterwards I went to one cafe that stayed open 24 hours and fortunately two or three of my Afghan buddies were there...fortunately I say because one of the Russians followed me and the next thing I knew I was arm wrestling with him and ended up on the floor. I was able to get up and there was no damage done.

But one of the other officers, I think it was the head of our information service, was so drunk that night that he collapsed while putting his key in the front door and spent the night on his doorstep.

The Ambassador heard about this and putting all these things together he decided that maybe the time had come to stop all this. It was getting out of hand. So that was the end of our “friendly parties” with the Russians. But it was fun while it lasted and I think it was really worthwhile.

Later, of course, I went back to Washington and became the Desk Officer for Afghanistan which worked out very well. Obviously I knew all the players. I was the Ambassador's man in Washington.

Q: So you were the Embassy's emissary to Washington.

SCHMELZER: Yes. And whatever the Ambassador wanted, I tried to get for him, Ambassador Steeves. He appreciated what I was doing for him. I was quite effective, I think, in that line.

I also had very close relations with the Afghan Embassy here. I set up a system where I would get together with their second ranking officer, Mohammad Rafiq, at least once a month for lunch. I would always bring along at least one other person who had some interest in Afghanistan, somebody from AID, USIA, Commerce, the Agency, DOD, etc. This was a good vehicle for all concerned. The Embassy appreciated it.

Q: What time frame was this?

SCHMELZER: I was the Desk Officer for two years, 1965-67.

This was a lively period. There was a war between India and Pakistan in 1965, and I shared in the additional duty of serving in the Operations Center. Fortunately I was on duty because I knew something about Afghanistan. Suddenly there was a telephone call...

Q: You were also doing duty in the Operations Center?

SCHMELZER: Yes. While the war was on there was a task force of officers from South Asian Affairs, so there was always one or two of us there around the clock.

On this particular occasion the phone rang and it was the Pentagon. There was some general on the line. “Hello, this is General so and so. Who are you?” “I am Frank Schmelzer.” “Well, Schmelzer, I don't know if you know but we have 12 C130s which are now just as we speak on their way from Tehran flying toward Rawalpindi.” “Yes, General.” “I think you know that we have this stand-down agreement between India and Pakistan so that these planes can arrive at 6 in the morning and the two air forces, the Indian and Pakistani air forces, would not engage during these two hours so that we can fly out American civilians on these C130s.” “Yes, General, I am aware of that.” “Well, unfortunately, nobody bothered to get permission from the Afghans to overfly their airspace.” “Well, General, I think that was a mistake.” “Well, Schmelzer, is this going to be a problem? What do the Afghans have?” “Well, they have SAM 2 missiles...” “What, SAM 2 missiles?” “Yes. They have MiGs 17s and 19s.” “What?” So we had to send a FLASH cable out to our Embassy and the Ambassador got somebody out of bed and within half an hour or less we had an agreement to overfly the country. As I say, it was a good thing I was there because they might not have bothered to get the agreement and it would have left at very least a very bad feeling among the Afghans. If they had used their missiles or planes they might have shot down some of those aircraft.

Shortly afterwards I called up the Afghan Ambassador, who was taking a shower, and said, “Well, Mr. Ambassador, as we speak there are C130s flying towards your country on their way to Pakistan. Unfortunately they took off from Tehran without permission from

your government to overfly your country." I heard the Ambassador suck in his breath. I then said, "But we now have your government's agreement." And I heard him exhale.

Another story which I think is worth noting is a reflection of just how parochial you can get. There I was the Desk Officer for Afghanistan, a country that most people hadn't heard about. I would have done anything to serve the interests of our relations with that country, and I did. For example. While I was on the Desk the Afghans suddenly decided that they wanted to join the jet age. They came to us...I mentioned earlier that we had this arrangement with Pan American. Pan American had a contract under which they serviced the Afghan airline, Ariana. So it was natural for the Afghans to come to us when they decided that they wanted to purchase a jet. Unfortunately the Afghans told us right off the top that they wanted to use that aircraft to open service to Peking. During that period this was a "no-no." Treasury regulations precluded moving any American equipment into a Communist dominated country, particularly into Communist China.

However, Johnson's White House was already looking for some avenue to begin to open the door to Communist China. So I could use that interest in the bureaucratic struggle over this issue. Treasury was against the loan, Pan American was in favor of it, Commerce was in favor of it because it would mean an export of an American aircraft. I don't think the CIA had much feeling about it one way or another. But Treasury was certainly opposed.

The big problem, of course, was the Ex-Im Bank, because they didn't want to touch this thing, particularly since they were going to Congress for an extension of their charter and for authority to provide additional financing. I was gung ho to get that plane. I did not know that the head of the Ex-Im Bank was dickering with State and hoped to become an ambassador. He assumed that I spoke for the State Department. Whatever the State Department wanted they should get because he wanted to become ambassador. So it was a very interesting bureaucratic tangle.

Finally we won. We got the jet. Then, of course, the Afghans decided they would not fly to Peking after all. I happened to know their jet pilot who was on one of the early runs. They hadn't had the plane very long. He flew into Frankfurt on his way to London. London tower told him that there was fog and they had better not come in. Well, you know how these Afghans are. They can be rather thick headed at times, and this guy certainly was. He was gung ho, full of oats, a young guy. He decided to go in and in the process cracked up the plane. Fortunately it was insured so the Afghans got another one.

I mention this parochial aspect because my next...well I had a year subsequently in Personnel with Steeves as his special assistant when he was Director General...but shortly thereafter I went into Political Military affairs (PM) where I had to adopt a completely different attitude. The Secretary of State at that time was heavily engaged, as everyone else was, in the Vietnam exercise.

Q: Was this Dean Rusk?

SCHMELZER: Yes. They were looking for a way out of this thing. The only time I met the Secretary, by the way, was when I was the Desk Officer for Afghanistan. The Afghans had the idea that because they represented a small non-aligned group they might have a role to play in reaching a settlement. I went in with the Afghan Ambassador once while he spoke to Secretary Rusk to push this particular approach. Nothing ever came of it.

One of the problems that the Secretary faced was the military assistance program. At that point it was still being administered by AID. The Secretary thought that the Bureaus were advancing their own regional interests. No one was pulling it all together. He was not being advised as to how the AID programs and military programs in any given Bureau would impact the other Bureaus, and he needed someone or something to give him a better overview. So he decided to take the military assistance program back from AID and put it in a new office within PM. I was one of the five people who went into this newly created office.

That was rather interesting. One of the things that they asked me to do was to look at Latin American affairs. I knew nothing about Latin American affairs. I had been to Puerto Rico several times to visit a sister. I couldn't speak Spanish. At that time the seventh floor interest in Latin America was a sort of residual interest. Their main concern was Vietnam.

Some of the other Bureaus were a little restive about the Latin American Bureau because the very modest military assistance programs that we had in South America were just sufficient to rub some Congressmen the wrong way, particularly Henry Reuss, a liberal from Wisconsin. He had a group around him, only a few in number, who represented the swing vote when it came to voting on the AID program. This made the NEA Bureau, which I had come from, very nervous, because they were afraid that if Brazil or Argentina were to use their military assistance funds or their foreign military sales credits to buy jet planes, this could get Reuss so mad that it would upset the whole AID apple cart and there would be no AID program for India, Jordan, Pakistan, etc.

So this was one of the elements in the equation. When I attended IG (Interdepartmental Group) meetings for Latin America, which were presided over by the Assistant Secretary of State for Latin American Affairs, I was representing PM. Here I was, a modest ranking officer, an FSO-4 which was equivalent to a Lt. Colonel, and because the seventh floor was engaged elsewhere, I was the one who was representing the seventh floor. I really had much more influence there than I should have had.

Usually I just went along for the ride. That is, I would monitor, but not try to interfere in Latin American Affairs. And the CAPS (country analysis and policy statements) were really an excellent device developed in the Latin American Bureau...I would review those things in draft if I got them in time. When they were approved they became the country statement so that all the agencies in the US government would know what the program was for the ensuing year...AID, State, USIA, DOD, Commerce, CIA, etc. Everyone knew what the program was and the resources to be applied. It was a very good system.

But every now and then something would go wrong and I would not get advance notice. One day this happened and suddenly I was looking at a draft CASP document about Bolivia as I was walking over to join the meeting. The first sentence nearly gave me heart failure. It said that Bolivia was “vital” to the security of the United States. I said to myself that this was crazy, stupid. What this meant in essence was that if everybody agreed to this, the generals would leave the IG meeting, return to the Pentagon and turn on their computers. The next time you had a little scuffle in the streets of La Paz, an American regimental combat team would fall out of the sky and we would be at war. I exaggerate, but not by much.

I decided I had to stop this somehow. I read the paper as quickly as possible to try to discover the basis for such a statement. At the meeting I listened as people went along with this without question. I raised my hand and was ignored. The Assistant Secretary may have believed that occasionally I was a trouble maker. So he ignored me. Sitting on the other side of the room was Winston Lord, who was representing the NSC. I was looking at him and thinking. Suddenly I had it. I looked at him, and ignored the Assistant Secretary, and turned to the guy from Commerce and said, “Is this assessment of the importance of Bolivia based on the two and a half war theory or the one and a half war theory?”

Two or three months before that President Nixon had determined, and this was in a memo from the NSC passed to all the agencies, that henceforth the United States Government only had to be prepared to fight one and a half wars worldwide simultaneously. Previously we had always been prepared to fight two and a half wars. A two and a half war program meant certain things with reference to stock piling. In this case, in reference to Bolivia, it meant tin. With a two and a half war program you needed a big stockpile of tin, but a one and a half wars program didn't need such a big stockpile and maybe the stockpile in existence was large enough to carry you for a good period of time. And that is what it was. They had failed to step down from the two and a half to the one and a half program. So the meeting adjourned.

Of course I made some enemies there because I made fools of everybody around the table, including the Ambassador who had written the program, the Assistant Secretary of State, the two generals who seemed willing to plug in their DOD computer programs, Winston Lord, who hadn't done his homework, and the Commerce official who answered my question with “two and a half wars.”

We met again several weeks later and this time Bolivia was “important,” no longer “vital;” there would be no regimental combat teams.

It was curious for me to move from Desk Officer where I was so parochial that I risked destroying the Ex-Im Bank by pushing that jet thing through. Perhaps the Ex-Im Bank finessed it legally, I don't know how they did it precisely. But surely they were running a risk. And yet we rammed that jet through.

Q: Why was Treasury against it?

SCHMELZER: Because of the regulations and the politics of it.

Q: But I thought Congress controlled the export import regulations.

SCHMELZER: Yes, they did, but Treasury had the exchange regulations and under those exchange regulations they could determine that anything that is an American product should not go into a Communist controlled country. But Commerce wanted to sell the aircraft.

So there I was a parochial Desk Officer one day and a little over a year later dealing with the big picture in PM. It was very interesting.

Q: Let me ask you a couple of questions. What was your role in the consulates...Madras and Frankfurt...with the Embassy? Were you running your own independent fiefdom or

was it like my experience in Saudi Arabia that whatever you wrote had to be cleared with the higher ups in the Embassy? Did you have your own show?

SCHMELZER: Yes, we did. In Frankfurt we had our own operation, the Refugee Relief Program. We were the largest single unit doing this Germany-wide, although we were getting guidance from the Embassy. In Madras, however, the consulates did their own political reporting and sent copies to the Embassy. We took some guidance from them. They told us what they wanted us to place emphasis on, but, no, we had our own reporting and sent the Embassy copies of it.

Often we had a different point of view than the Embassy. Sometimes we were better informed than they were, too. For example, I remember the question of Goa when Galbraith was the Ambassador and he was reporting back...the consulates would see some of the Embassy reporting, but not all of it...so we knew that Galbraith was reporting back to Washington that Nehru had assured him that the Indians would not move into Goa. We knew god damn well that he would. We had seen troop movements. It was not that we could read Nehru's mind but we just knew Nehru was going to move in. It was just quite clear. And he did. We tried to tell that to the Embassy, but they couldn't do anything because Galbraith was giving them the line. He was just wrong on this and wouldn't take advice from us or his own political officers on that issue.

This, of course, gets to another point...You have heard this before and probably have been subjected to it yourself. I refer to the junior officer who seems to be closest to the ground and sometimes comes up with an analysis or a point of view which the seniors don't like. This happened to me in Madras. After two years in Madras I was well tuned in. I would go home at night and the phone would begin to ring and by 8:00 o'clock there would be 20 or 30 Indians there. Of course, they wanted to drink my free booze, but I just had very good relations with these people. So I was extremely well informed. One result of that was that I knew very well what the opposition party, the DMK, was doing. I would tell the Consul General that they would move way ahead in the coming election and in five years would

take over the government in that state. Well, that would make him furious because he was getting the New Delhi line from the governor and the chief minister, that the Congress Party was strong and was going to win the elections and that the opposition party was a bunch of creeps and not reliable, etc.

The Consul General got so mad with me that he would not let me report on Madras state, which I knew so well. I did the other three states. Indeed, I had the best record in India in predicting what was going to happen. But the Consulate “blew” Madras because the guy he made do the reporting on Madras had to reflect the view of the Consul General. I kept telling him that he was making a big mistake.

Q: Did this show up in your efficiency reports?

SCHMELZER: Well, it didn't help me any.

Q: Had you ever sent a dissenting cable to Washington or Official-Informal letters saying you disagreed?

SCHMELZER: I think that I probably did, I don't remember. I must have sent a letter or two, perhaps not a cable. But you see that sort of thing all the time in the Foreign Service. It is a pity.

The same thing happened to some degree in Tehran, I am sure. We had people there who knew what was going on. They could speak Farsi. But the Ambassador had to come up with a different line because every time the Shah would come to Washington he would meet the President and charm the pants off of him and whatever the Shah wanted he could get. You just couldn't go against that.

Q: You were also in the Foreign Service at the time that additional agencies started going overseas...Treasury, Commerce, etc. What was that like? How many of the CIA folks were involved in this change?

SCHMELZER: Well, the Agency was always there, of course. Our relations with the Agency were quite good. At least mine were.

Q: How big a presence did they have?

SCHMELZER: At one point they suggested that I might want to join their ranks in Afghanistan. I think because I was so successful with this group of five people that I have mentioned, and also possibly with the way I was seeing Taraki. I guess they found that impressive. But I preferred to remain a cookie pusher.

Q: How big a presence did they have? I was surprised when I went to Jeddah that two thirds of the people there worked for either the CIA or the NSA. I never suspected before that they had their own consulates around the world.

SCHMELZER: Oh yes. I don't want to comment on the numbers or anything. They weren't overpowering.

[end of tape one]

Q: Today is December 8, 1992 and this is the second interview with Frank Schmelzer.

SCHMELZER: I thought it might be interesting to say a few words about Vietnam where I served in the CORDS program. I was there from the end of 1970 through the late spring of 1972. This particular organization was sort of a parallel government in that there were teams of American advisers attached to their Vietnamese counterparts, as they were called, at all levels of the government, from the district level through the provincial level and, of course, up to the nation's capital in Saigon. There was an American team in each one of the provinces of Vietnam. The chief of the team was either an American military officer, usually a Colonel, or an American Foreign Service Officer, usually a grade 4 or 3, in the old grades [2 or 1 in current grades].

Initially I went to Nha Trang, but only for a short while. From there I was assigned to Tuy Hoa, which was on the coast of one of the provinces. I was there for about two or three months, just sort of getting used to the system, the so-called pacification program. I think the things that I remember best there are a couple of attacks we had. The VC were more interested in the military side of the compound than they were in us civilians.

I remember the first time a attack occurred: There was a great deal of commotion and suddenly somebody came running around and got us all in a bunker nearby, slapped helmets on our heads and gave us each a rifle. We were peering through slots waiting for the VC to come after us. There was a lot of ruckus, on the other side of the compound and I think one of the Marines got wounded that night.

The second time that the VC attacked, some time later, I slept right through the whole thing I am happy to say.

Q: How did you actually get things done there? You had to deal with the Vietnamese army, with civilians and the US Army.

SCHMELZER: You would have a huddle among yourselves and decide what you wanted the Vietnamese to do or what you would suggest they should do. Sometimes they would follow your advice and sometimes they wouldn't. If you felt that the matter was sufficiently serious and they were dragging their feet too much and something should be done, then you would kick it up to the next level.

Since the Vietnamese in each level knew that your line of communications with your own superiors was at least as good as theirs and that if your superior decided to push this thing that he would go to his level, the Vietnamese knew he might get a rocket, get kicked by his superior. So we certainly were influential.

This structure, by the way, this quasi-parallel government, if you will, was an outgrowth of our experience in China during World War II where we had a lot of goodies to pass

on to the Chinese but our own structure was not very effective. So this was designed to overcome some of these problems. I thought in general the organization was pretty good.

We were also dealing with the Vietnamese civilians. I spent most of my time in Vietnam in Ban Me Thuot up in the Central Highlands. One of the big problems there was the relationship between the Vietnamese and the Montagnards, the indigenous people. The problem was that the Vietnamese were coming in and taking the land. Their style of agriculture was intensive and quite different from that of the Montagnards. It was reminiscent of the English colonists here in the United States and their attitude toward land settlement and the American Indian. The Vietnamese, of course, would go in and take the land and work it very intensively. The Montagnards would look upon the land quite differently. They would cultivate one area for two or three years and then move to another area near by; after another few years they would return to the first area. They wouldn't cultivate the whole area solidly as the Vietnamese would do. But, of course, over time this meant that the Vietnamese were gradually taking more and more land away from the Montagnards. So there was a lot of trouble there.

Towards the end of my stay, we had come up with something that was really rather effective. We had decided to persuade the Vietnamese government to give title to the Montagnards to specific tracts of land. This was made somewhat easier because so many of the Montagnards had been moved from their traditional villages into protective, fortified areas. The idea was to give them title to those fortified areas and the lands adjacent, so that they would be protected from the Vietnamese encroachment. This also had the additional benefit of making the Montagnards more willing to support the common war effort. This, by the way, was a very serious fracture point. In the spring of 1972 when the North Vietnamese attacked in force, in the Central Highlands, one of the people that I was working with was a deputy in the provincial government who was representing the interests of his Montagnards tribal group. He had suggested to Saigon, through his political leadership, that two divisions of Montagnards be created, armed and trained in order to fend off the North Vietnamese. In fact this request was made before the North Vietnamese

attack. The answer from Saigon was no, certainly not. Then it was one division? No. Two regiments? No. One regiment? No. Now had such a Montagnards force been available in the spring of 1972, and later in 1975, the result would have been quite different.

In 1972 the North Vietnamese were held because the South Vietnamese fought quite well and the Americans were still there with air power. But in 1975, of course, they punched right through that area. In the spring of 1972 Ban Me Thuot was the headquarters of one of the South Vietnamese divisions...they had three regiments. One was destroyed by the North Vietnamese army. So another regiment moved North to a pass, about 40-50 miles north of Ban Me Thuot. The North Vietnamese got into that pass and this was rather serious because communications between Ban Me Thuot and the northern provinces had been cut. So the B-52s came in to dislodge the North Vietnamese. They bombed that place for five or six days. On the next day, this particular South Vietnamese regiment went in and got “creamed.”

The speculation at the time was that somehow the North Vietnamese would sense when the B-52s were coming and they would run out of the pass. The B-52s would bomb the hell out of the place and then the North Vietnamese would move back in. This went on and on. On the sixth day when that regiment went in the North Vietnamese were back in the pass and the South Vietnamese got slaughtered. So then they decided to move the third regiment North. Just about at that time we got news of North Vietnamese tanks being sighted due west of us—that was 15 miles away on the other side of the river. The river was the boundary between us and Cambodia. So that made some of us a little nervous.

Q: As well it might.

SCHMELZER: Well, one of the military members of our team had been in the American calvary, as he called it, the Tank Corps, for some 25 years. So I called him in one day and we went up to the map in the office and I said, “Billie, I think it would be nice if you could get into a chopper and see just how much of a barrier that river is.” “Ah, Jesus Christ, don't

bother me with that stuff. I have been in the Tank Corps for 25 years and I tell you there is no way the NVA can get tanks across that God damn river." I said, "Well, look Billie, you are probably right but I would appreciate it if you would just take a chopper and go and look." "All right, but it is just a waste of time."

Well, he went out and took a look. About an hour later he stormed back in and said, "Wow, that river is no problem at all. Come look." And he dragged me over to the map. He said, "Gee, with 10 tanks I could take this God damn town and reduce it to rubble. Look, here is where you come across, the river is only a few feet deep." Billie really got carried away, he was so excited.

Of course, everybody was screaming for various things. One thing that everybody wanted about that time was the "LAWS." It was sort of a bazooka thing that you put to your shoulder to knock out a tank. Suddenly we started to scream for them too. I put in an order for a 100 of them. It took a little while to get them, but I finally did. After that I had three of those damn things in my desk.

The other thing I used to keep around was a carbine. I always had it near me when I went to bed at night.

Q: You didn't trust that your diplomatic passport would protect you?

SCHMELZER: No, no. My hearing improved quite a bit. I got so I could hear a cat walk down that alley outside. And there were a couple of VC attacks on Ban Me Thuot while I was there. But I would just go upstairs where there was another civilian on our team who had been through the wars...he was married to a Montagnards and had a good balcony of solid cement. We would crouch down behind that and wait for the noise to dissipate, which it normally would.

Our organization was essentially a good one. The basic problem was that we were trying to build a nation in one half a nation and it just wasn't going to work. The South

Vietnamese, I think, occasionally had the will to fight and when they did they could do a good job. But, somehow the psychology of the whole thing was wrong. It was their war and we made it our war and that was the biggest mistake. We were just there passing out the goodies and to a certain degree trying to tell them what to do and sometimes they would respond and sometimes they wouldn't.

Q: How did other Foreign Service officers think? Were they telling Washington what worked and what didn't? Or were they told to shut up, this was policy and you will carry it out?

SCHMELZER: Quite a few of the people were disgruntled. I remember one young man in Nha Trang who had been there a short period of time, and he was assigned to one of the districts. He decided after about a week that he was not going to take anymore of this nonsense. He didn't agree with the program. So he just decided that he was going to quit. He came in and fortunately the man in charge of our operation in MR2, military region 2 which included one-fourth of the country...a big chunk of the Central Highlands and a big chunk of the northern coastal areas...that man was a Foreign Service officer and he understood the problem. He talked to this young man and found another job for him in which he did very well. He had a contingent of four or five Vietnamese who would go out and interview people...do in-depth interviews on various aspects of the pacification program on rural development, civilian guards training, etc. It was a very valuable product that he came up with and he enjoyed doing it. It was more similar to a regular Foreign Service activity, so he didn't leave the Foreign Service. In fact, he has done fairly well since.

In one of my great moments in Ben Me Thuot I was able to use some diplomacy...I say this with tongue in cheek, of course. While I was there initially there were still some American troops, the drawdown had not been completed. So the PX was there and there was a collection of whore houses. The complaint was that the ladies were charging too much for their services. And a lot of these little plastic vials that drugs come in were being seen

all around the outskirts of this compound where the ladies were. So it was decided that something had to be done about this. The good colonel in charge of our team decided that this was a problem for the State Department. So I organized a little convoy and we went down there. There was a jeep with MPs, a jeep with translators, etc. I think there were three jeeps that went, with no flags flying. We went there for a prearranged meeting with the madams. They were very polite. The girls were tittering around the corners watching this. I told these ladies that there were complaints about the prices and that it was not right to have drugs on the scene. If there were anymore complaints on either of these two points we would have to declare the place off limits. Of course that would put these women out of business. So things were rather quiet there for a while thereafter.

Q: Were the Foreign Service positions in Vietnam sought after or were they regarded as a punishment detail?

SCHMELZER: I think it is fair to say they were not sought after. In fact, as you know, some of the younger officers resigned rather than go to Vietnam. The Department of State was always trying to keep 100 Foreign Service officers in Vietnam. Most were in this CORDS program. That meant that there were one or two in each province. In Tuy Hoa I was the only one, but in Ban Me Thuot there were two of us. No, these positions were not sought after.

Some of the older officers, of course, the FSO-3s, who saw that their careers were not flourishing, decided to go with it, to roll with this punch. There were some advantages to this. For one thing it was occasionally rather exciting. It was interesting. You learned a lot. You had a chance to see this great bureaucracy in motion. You were learning a great deal about the major problem of the day. And, of course, the Director General would come through every now and then...I think he tried to make it once a year...and would make promises that your next assignment would be a good one.

I remember that in my case the Director General came through and he asked me where I wanted to go. I said, “Well, Mr. Ambassador, I would like to go to Paris.” “Well, Frank, how would you like to go to French-speaking West Africa?” Then I said, “Well, I would like to go to Rome.” “Well, Frank, how would you like to go to French-speaking West Africa?” I had been working on my French and had used it during the tour. I said, “Mr. Ambassador, I would like to go to French-speaking West Africa.”

Of course, when I came back to the Department there was nothing laid on. That is how I ended up in the six-month economics course. I came in on a Monday and went through four Bureaus (I avoided Latin America) and by Thursday I had not seen anything that I liked. There was something in INR that might have been interesting, working on Russian ballistic missiles. Then I heard there was a vacancy in the six-month economics course at FSI beginning the following Monday. I called up and there was one vacancy because one guy had quit. I was asked if I had ever had integral calculus—and I had had two years in fact in college. So I began class the following Monday. This meant I had to give up my home leave. So much for the Director General and his promises of French-speaking West Africa.

Q: What was your relation with the Embassy there? I was surprised you had a full service Embassy. I still have a publication that the Commercial section produced called “Doing Business in Vietnam.”

SCHMELZER: For the CORDS program there was very little contact with the Embassy. When we went to Saigon we would go to the Embassy to say hello to the people in the personnel section or the administrative section, or if we knew anyone in the political or economic section we would say hello to them. And sometimes they were interested in our experiences out in the field. They were curious as to how things were going on. But generally speaking there wasn't much of a relationship.

Q: You reported to Washington or to the military?

SCHMELZER: We reported through our own chain of command which meant essentially to the military...more to the military side than to the Embassy. We all did an end-of-tour report. Mine was rather scathing, I must admit. When I went down to Saigon on my way out, the General who was then in charge of this whole program, was shaking his head and said “Frank, did you really have to write a report like that?” “Sorry, General, I really did.” I had many misgivings about this whole thing. I didn't think it was going to work. It was not working really. It was a noble effort but misplaced.

One of the things that John Paul Vann instituted when he took over MR2 was this idea that all advisers and all counterparts would spend one night a month, preferably once a week, outside their principal abode. In other words you were supposed to go out and spend a night in a village somewhere in order to show your face so that the local Vietnamese would know you were interested in them, to see what was going on, and dislodge VC who might be in the area. Well, I remember one night when I went out with the province chief...he was grumbling all the time. He didn't like this idea. Of course, he would rather stay in his very comfortable palazzo in Ban Me Thuot. He went out with an entourage of about a 100 troops to make sure he was safe during the night. The VC in this province were not very strong anyway. I would guess that they represented at most 3 or 4 percent of the population. And they tended to be isolated in one of the areas up against the hills some distance away. Another 15-20 percent were pro-Saigon and the rest of the people, 60-70 percent, didn't care a damn one way or another. This was the problem really. But in any case we spent the night out and came back the next day and were presumably all the better for it. We had to sleep on a table top on that occasion, but we did that sort of thing from time to time.

A more interesting night out was with John Paul Vann, himself. He came in flying his own chopper and wanted to pick up the province senior adviser or his deputy, i.e., me. I forget why the Colonel couldn't make it, perhaps he was out of town and I was in charge at that time. In any case I went with John Paul Vann and we went all the way down to the

southern end of the province where he knew a local Vietnamese school teacher. He spent two or three hours grilling this guy asking him about the local VC, their organization, their channels of communication, etc. It was a rather impressive display on the part of John Paul. I presume in part this was designed to fire me up so that I would be a little more aggressive in winning the war.

One of the things that I did to preserve my sanity there was to play the flute. I composed short songs and tried to record them, which was difficult because there was always such a racket going on. For one thing, there was a of these cabaret down the street where the troops would go in and buy drinks and dance with the girls. They always had rock and roll music blaring away. And there were choppers always flying around the place. And the road traffic. I would have to get up at about 3 or 4 in the morning when it was relatively quiet and play the flute. I never had any complaints, I am happy to say.

Drugs were a problem, as I mentioned already. Fortunately not on our CORDS team, as a rule. Although in one of our district teams (there were four district teams) there was a drug addict. We had done a lot to try to rehabilitate the guy. We had taken him down to Nha Trang a couple of times for detoxification and I think he went to Saigon once for similar treatment. Each time he would come back “cured” and each time he was not cured. Of course this created a morale problem for the rest of the team, because they could not rely upon this guy. They couldn't have him stand guard duty because they were afraid that if he got spaced out that the VC would come through and they would all die. And this drug addict was a little unhappy too because he knew what was going to happen to him. Sooner or later the VC would attack and in the confusion he would just happen to be killed. I think it was pretty much understood on both sides that if the VC ever attacked in force that he was going to get it.

Q: This guy was an American?

SCHMELZER: Yeah.

Q: And who was going to do him in?

SCHMELZER: The Americans were going to kill him. This was the common understanding. The only thing you could do about it was to get him out of there and finally we did transfer him out. But the problem was that on paper he was no longer a drug addict because he had been through all of these detoxification programs.

Q: I remember they did that to some of these characters in Germany and Saudi Arabia. The guy had a real problem. He was medically evacuated for cirrhosis of the liver. But he was clean. But they managed to fire one person because they didn't like the fact that she was late to work all of the time. She drank a little too much.

SCHMELZER: I thought I might say one or two things about the foreign cultures you serve in, because I think this is important.

Q: Yes, a lot of people now days do not get plugged into a culture. They sit back with their VCRs and do their time and get out.

SCHMELZER: I was fortunate because before I went to India I had already had graduate training and had studied Sanskrit, Hindustani, Indian culture, etc. and had a pretty good idea of what to expect. I had also been exposed to Americans who had focused on the language, the history and philosophy of India and then had been shocked by the reality of the thing when they actually got to India.

Q: You get the taxi driver who wants to take you for a tour of New Delhi instead of going down the road a half mile to the hotel.

SCHMELZER: Precisely. So you know all about this. An extreme example of the importance of this occurred while I was in the Embassy in New Delhi. You know secretaries assigned to the Embassy would usually get one, two or three weeks orientation

at the Foreign Service Institute. It was rather short, probably useful, but not always effective as this example indicates.

Two girls had arrived and within two weeks or so they decided to go out on their own to a temple about 25 or 30 miles north of New Delhi during a festival period. There was a big celebration. They went on their own. Most of the rural people who flocked to this temple for the big show were peasants who had never seen white women before and certainly had never had an opportunity to pinch them on the bottom and the breasts, which they proceeded to do. So these women were jammed into a corner of the temple and were pinched black and blue. They finally got out of there and came back to the Embassy the worse for wear. One of these girls was psychotic and should have been evacuated immediately. She stayed on in the Embassy for two years and hated India and Indians and was a focal point of rage and hatred for those two years she was there. It was just so foolish. She obviously didn't learn anything in that orientation at FSI. Had they gone out to that temple with just one male, Indian or American, they would have had better treatment. And, of course, there really should have been two or three males along. That was one instance.

Another thing used to happen often, very curious, at cocktail parties. Let's say half of those standing in the room were Indian and the other half Americans and Europeans. You would notice a motion begin. The European and American would begin to back up. And I would watch this...it would be kind of fun to see it on a video and I bet you would have a circle there. What was going on? The Indian and the Americans have a different sense of space. So while the Indian was trying to get close enough to you to be comfortable in his relationship, the American has to back away to regain his proper sense of space. This creates a tiny bit of tension both for the American and the Indian. The Indian senses that the American is not being friendly and the American senses that the Indian is being too pushy. I caught on to this right away and would not back up. Immediately the Indian would sense that I was a friend, that I was on his side. That was very interesting.

Q: Did this make you more effective because the Indians would automatically open up to you?

SCHMELZER: Right. Absolutely. This was particularly true later on in Madras because I already knew this. When I got to Madras I had no problems at all.

While I was in Madras the Chinese attacked India. The Cuban missile crisis arose at the same time. I happened to be on tour in Kerala that same week. It was very interesting because the Indians for years had been at pains to be neutral, to exploit their neutralism and to trot out this expression “Hindi Chini Bhai Bhai Hain,” that is the Indians and Chinese were brothers. Within hours of that attack suddenly everything had changed. The Indians were running up to me in the streets and saying, “You Americans, of course, will come and help us after you take care of the Russians, won't you. The Chinese eat rats you know.” It was interesting. Just like that. Here again, the cultural divide. They eat rats! The cultural divide, just like that. Wham!

Another thing about the Indians that was fascinating to me was their skill in argument. Of course this has been developed over centuries, particularly among the Brahmins. They are masters at this. And the Americans are not so good. We had this type of culture until Gutenberg came along and then we began to read, and no longer to memorize things. We no longer have the classical education which we had until the 19th century where they taught you logic and debating skills. Most Americans don't have that anymore. So in New Delhi I would see Americans reduced to tears from frustration. They would not know how to debate with these Indians. I would watch this and be terribly amused because I could see what the Indian was doing. He was comparing Indian ideals against American practice. And, of course, the deck is obviously stacked in his favor when he does that. The trick is, of course, to state American ideals and compare them to Indian practice. Then the Indians would start to sputter. Of course, people like Krishna Menon and Nehru were using the same trick in a sense. It was really quite interesting.

The Russians, and I saw this in Kabul, also had strong cultural divides that were interesting. One of them, was with the Chinese...I think the Russians were really innately afraid of them. I remember one time when I was talking to some Russians about Chinese missile development, and you could smell a change, emanating perhaps from their armpits as if some chemical reaction had taken place. Curious.

In Stuttgart, in 1978 toward the end of my tour, I knew I was going to retire and study music, and I related this to my German friends with interesting reactions. Many had studied music when they were young, had always had a love of music, but had gone on into business, banking, and were married and had children. The German educational system and culture are in some ways more rigid than ours. You could see the eyes of some of these Germans light up. This was something they would like to do, but they couldn't. Their wives would immediately get nervous because they didn't want Hans to even entertain the idea of leaving his good position in the bank to go back to university to study music. It was a threat to them.

You mention this to an Indian and, of course, it was a great idea. To the Indian it was just the most natural thing in the world. Why? Because the Indians had that traditional sense of the four stages of life. You are young and a student, then a householder, then a civic member of society, and then you prepare for the fourth stage. In the fourth stage you go off into a jungle, read the religious books and prepare to die...to climb up the chain of consciousness, etc. In fact once I actually met a couple of Indians who had done this, who were living up in the foothills of the Himalayas. One had been the president of a medical school in the Punjab and the other one had been a professor.

Let me say one more brief thing about India, and these are personal experiences that I used indirectly in my second symphony, which I entitled “Taj Mahal.” One of the things that some of us used to do in Delhi was to go out to Humayun's Tomb. I would take a flute and one of the ladies from the Embassy had a guitar and the acoustics in there were so wonderful that a guitar chord would sound just like an organ, and the flute was wonderful

too. Another place we visited was Mathura on the Jumna River which is supposed to be the birth place of Krishna. There was a great scene there near his temple. People would go there for the so-called Arati ceremony at evening. They light a little candle and put it on a small piece of bark and float it down the river. They throw chickpeas in the river to feed the turtles, thereby keeping them away from the candles.

In Agra these turtles are not well fed. An American who had been through there told me the following unhappy story. One morning he happened to be behind the Taj Mahal on the river side where some people were washing clothes. One old man took off his turban to wash it and it got away from him. He stepped into deeper water to get it and a lot of these turtles grabbed him, pulled him under the water and ate him alive in front of everybody. These were the same turtles that you would see at Mathura, but here they were not well fed. A terrible story.

Q: Are these the same turtles they are reintroducing back into the rivers to clean up the pollution?

SCHMELZER: Yes, I think so. They have a head the size of your fist. They are a good size.

In Agra...I saw the Taj Mahal there three times in the full moonlight. A wonderful experience. It just seems to float. I mention this for two reasons. One, because I understand now you can't get in there anymore at night, that they have locked it up, which is a pity. It is a wonderful thing to see in full moonlight. It is almost a mystical experience. And I tried to get a sense of that in the last movement of this symphony...a sense of floating.

Q: Tell me some more about the Refugee Program in Frankfurt? How effective was it? How broad was it? The kinds of people you had in it?

SCHMELZER: It was a very interesting program and a lot of hard work. Particularly towards the end of it. The legislation for this particular refugee program expired on December 31, 1956. So we knew that we had to process as many of these people as we could because after that date anybody left hanging there would, indeed, be left hanging there.

Q: These were Germans or people from other parts of Europe?

SCHMELZER: There were two groups of people essentially. There were Germans who had been expelled from Eastern Europe and the so-called escapees who were Germans who had escaped from East Germany and other nationalities who had escaped from Eastern Europe. There were Russians, Mongolians, Czechs, Poles, Yugoslavs, Romanians, etc. Now some of these people had been around for a long time because they had been processed initially under the Displaced Persons Program, but for one reason or another had not been granted visas. In many cases they were too close to the Nazi Party or to the SS or they might have been Russians without sufficient documentation, that sort of thing.

Q: Was there any kind of quota or was it if you met the basic qualifications you could go to the States?

SCHMELZER: The basic qualification was to be an expellee or an escapee. We tried to deal with people who had been there for two years or more so there would be a police record on them. This was not always the case, of course, but we tried to do that. A lot of these people had been there for years already. While I was there the broad strictures, e.g. against mere membership in the Nazi Party, were lifted so we could treat most of these people on a case-by-case basis. The process was that people would make known their interest in getting a visa. Then we would tell them what documentation we required. Time would go by as they met these requirements. There would be the requirement of having a sponsor in the United States. If all these conditions were met on paper, and if we had no

obvious questions at that time then we would call them forward for an interview. If all went well, we would then give them a visa and then they would be immediately interviewed by an immigrant official, right there in Frankfurt.

This of course is unlike the usual procedure where the visa officer gives a person a visa and then he goes to the United States and is admitted or not admitted at the port of entry in New York or wherever it may be. But here the immigration officer was right there because INS was well aware that this Refugee Relief program had many more problems then the regular immigration case. So by having the INS officer there they were able to stop a lot of these people and protect their bureaucratic imperative that way. The result was that we often had a difference of opinion. We would say the person was qualified and the INS officer would say no. Then we would send a memorandum back to Washington and it would be fought out between the State Department and the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

Later, of course, I was the so-called security officer because my German was pretty good. So I got all the nasty cases, the ones that were a little harder to deal with. I had quite a few instances where I thought the person should be given the break, or should get the visa, because I felt we had settled whatever questions there had been and the INS officer would not agree. I won about 90 percent of those cases.

But you can see why there would be a difference in outlook. The Foreign Service officer was usually a younger man, it might have been his first overseas post, and he was often imbued with more feelings of tenderness towards these people, many of whom had had a hard life. Whereas the INS officer tended to be a hard-bitten older man. Maybe he had spent years on the Rio Grande trying to fight the big fight to keep out the wetbacks, etc. He had had more experience and had built up some feelings that you shouldn't be too soft on these people because eventually there were going to be trouble makers among them.

Here is an illustration of how much some of these people had gone through. One of the people I gave a visa to was a White Russian. He left the Soviet Union sometime in the 1920s and he ended up in Germany. I don't remember whether he went to Germany immediately or landed in Germany after the war. In any case, for that long period of time, from the 1920s through 1956...he had been a Colonel in the Russian Army when he left...For all that 30 year period he had very poor living conditions, had been sweeping streets—he had not been able to find a good job. He was there with his wife and someone or other. I stood up and saluted him saying, “Colonel, Sir, here is your visa.” The man cried. It was the first time in thirty years that anyone had shown him any respect. Well this was the sort of thing that you were dealing with.

The trouble people could get into was amazing. I remember a river boat captain who had a boat on the Rhine River. He was charged with incest with his daughter. Well, there was no way that he was going to get a visa. Another guy I had was supposed to be in charge of all the drug operations on the west bank of the Rhine River. I had two US Marines standing in full uniform outside my door when that guy came in because I was going to tell him no. I told him no and he walked out and never caused any trouble.

There was another interesting thing that happened there. I knew there was going to be trouble over this eventually. I don't know who was running these guys, whether it was CIA, military or what, but every now and then you would see these green papers come through. All paperwork normally was white and suddenly here would be an application on green paper. You would look at it and realize what it was. A little while later this young man would come in, his head closely cropped, in his late twenties or early thirties, a muscular looking fellow, alert, active, with one or two Americans with him from this particular Service. These people were operating behind the Iron Curtain. They were running back and forth carrying out dangerous missions. Their reward later on was to get an immigration visa. Everybody in the building would know that this guy was probably involved in some intelligence work for the Americans.

I kept telling these intelligence officials that they shouldn't do it this way because eventually you are going to lose one of these guys. Everybody knows. Why are you using green paperwork? Sure enough, one day we gave a guy a visa and a day or two later he disappeared. He was never found again. So then we changed the procedure.

So I came up with this system...these gentlemen would come through with white paper, would come through with only one person, not two, and I would keep the paperwork and not turn it over to the German locals in the building. Instead, after the locals left, I would go down and open up the safe and take out the seal and stamp it and do all the paperwork. In the meantime I had taken a block of visa numbers from the staff without their knowing it and would do all the work myself. We never lost anyone else after that.

I also used to deal with all the Russians. There was so much backbiting in the Russian community. Some files on these guys were a foot thick. It was terrible to work with those people.

Occasionally you got an East German agent. You had to know a certain amount of information about each one of the East European countries. You were not expected to be an expert, but you had to have some sense as to when these people were lying. Because if they lied on something that was material, their visa application would be denied.

Another thing of interest was that these people had really been through the mill. You bring them in for an interview and before you ask the first question some of these people would start laying out on your desk 10 or 15 documents. Even before you said anything. They were so used to this and were so regimented and indoctrinated and covered by paperwork. The average American would have only a driver's license and social security card and a credit card, but that would be it.

Several of us FSOs who were in Frankfurt during 1955 and 1956 have been interviewed by the FBI in recent years concerning the procedures we used during our administration

of the Refugee Relief Program. The FBI's Office of Special Investigations (OSI) spoke to me on three occasions concerning visas issued then to persons subsequently believed by OSI to be deportable as war criminals because they were guards or otherwise engaged at concentration camps. I assured the FBI that we considered membership in the SS and service as guards to be “material” (but not grounds per se for automatic denial of a visa) —i.e., a basic factor to be reviewed carefully during the visa process, and that withholding such information, or lying about such a background, would be grounds for denial of a visa. OSI found these discussions to be useful as they considered whether or not to open or to pursue deportation proceedings.

Q: How much help did you get from your local staff? When I was in Jeddah as visa king, I was trained by my people. After I had been doing this for a while I got a feel for the fraud patterns and a sense of what kind of story was the real stuff and what kind of story was a lie. When you walked in for the first time, how did you get a handle on what was coming down?

SCHMELZER: I think that might have been the case if I had been working only with German applicants, but this was quite different. So I got my training from the Americans who had been there before, one in particular. So we didn't rely as much on the German staff.

Occasionally, if you had applicants who didn't speak German very well, and we had a local who spoke the applicant's language, we would bring him or her in.

Toward the end of the year we were working seven days a week, ten hours a day. This was in 1956 and we were trying to get as many visas processed as we could before the deadline came up. And then, of course, the Hungarian Revolt broke out in November and that had an impact on our operation. I got jaundice about that time and was in bed for six weeks, so I was out of it. We had to send people to Vienna to process the Hungarians who

were flooding in across the border. So our operation kept working right up to New Year's Eve.

It was a good training. You learned an awful lot about human nature very quickly. You had to. You had to make an assessment of people's character and understand their background.

Q: The Foreign Service as a career and the Foreign Service Personnel. Have they changed?

SCHMELZER: I never thought much about this until the very end. When I was in Stuttgart (1974-78) I suddenly realized that the people coming into the Foreign Service were different animals. Partly because every generation tends to look upon the younger generation to some extent in this way, but in this case I think it was an accurate description.

When I went into the Foreign Service I knew nothing about our Foreign Service Retirement program. I wasn't interested in it. I didn't care about a lot of these perks. That was secondary. I was interested in learning about India, or the job, whatever, and tried to do what I could to enhance our policies and interests. So that was my focus. If you had to work a little extra on the weekend, or whatever, that was expected.

Certainly you wanted to entertain and do a good job of it. But while I was in Stuttgart, suddenly we had people who were assigned there with quite a different attitude. They thought that entertaining the Germans was an unnecessary requirement. Why should they do that? And if they did entertain, they were bound to spend as little money as possible. I think you ran into something like that.

Of course, about that same time you were getting the development of the woman's movement which was partly responsible for this. So suddenly I began to realize there was

a different breed. If in the fifties and sixties we had encountered people like this we would have sent them home. You wouldn't tolerate behavior like that.

And this struck me again when I came back here. One day, while back in the United States and retired, this would have been in the early eighties, I had a call from one of my nephews. He said, “Listen, my former roommate is interested in the Foreign Service. He has passed the written exam but hasn't passed the orals or security exam yet and thought he would like to talk to you.” I said, “Sure, fine.” A couple of minutes later this guy calls me up. He starts talking and I am giving him advice. Then he says, “Gee, I smoked a lot of marijuana when I was a kid, but I am not going to tell the security agent when he asks me that. I don't think I should tell him that.” I say, “Look, you don't want to lie. This is no way to start your career by telling lies. If it happened be truthful about it. They will understand this.” “Oh,” he says. A little later he says, “And then there was a question about my wife's health. My wife is an Indian and has asthma but I am not going to tell anybody about that because...” I say, “Gee, you should tell the truth on these matters.” A minute later he was saying, “Well, I really only want to go into the Foreign Service for a few years anyway. Just long enough to make some business contacts and then I want to go into business for myself.” By that time I nearly hung up the phone. This was amazing. In my day no one ever looked upon the Foreign Service that way. For us earlier it was a wonderful opportunity to serve our country in an interesting way.

Q: I was severely criticized in Jeddah for entertaining and in Stuttgart they simply cut off my funds. I got no cooperation from the guy who used to rent out his maid for parties. I eventually packed it in and said, “The hell with it, I just can't do it.” I was frustrated. But then nobody else entertained.

SCHMELZER: Well, we certainly did. We always did. In Madras I used to have parties anywhere from two to two hundred people. I was really set up for it there.

Nathan, my principal cook and bearer (I also had an assistant cook and a gardener), had great aplomb and could handle anything on short notice. He also could be relied upon the next day for a full report (X had this many whiskies, Y had so many plates of curry, Z tried to take A into the bush). And as I noted above, prohibition made my ample supply of booze quite attractive. (We also had an ayah, or nurse-maid, after our son was born—dismissed, unhappily, when she was found to have leprosy).

Q: Well tell me about the agency. I had run into what seemed to be their own consulate in Jeddah, two-thirds of the people working for NSA or CIA. I had never heard of this and really wondered how many consulates around the world were really agency consulates. I know the presence is increasing. The Army Intelligence officers in Stuttgart went from one to three. The communicator's wife worked for the agency and he wanted to retire from State and join the agency because the pay was better. And the last two consul generals? I was not too sure they worked for the State Department.

SCHMELZER: Well, this is a new trend for me. Although we were always aware that there were agency personnel and knew pretty much who they were, they were never a predominant element. Although we didn't always know exactly what they were doing, at least I didn't know, our relations were generally pretty good. It was in their interest that they have good relations with us for their own reasons, as well as for ours. We would talk about matters of common interest. Often they were very well informed on certain selected subjects, but they didn't have the broader background to put some of the material they had into the proper context. So it was useful on both sides to share notes that way. We would get more of the detail and they would get more of the context.

Interestingly enough I had a similar relationship with somebody in the British Embassy in Kabul. They didn't have as many people as we did so they were spread rather thin. The result was that my British colleague did a lot of things across the board while I was focusing on political developments in Afghanistan. He was meeting ministers and I was

not. So he could tell me things that would be useful and I would tell him a lot that he didn't know. It was a useful relationship.

But, no, I never had the feeling that the agency, as a group, were running the show. This must be a new development. Or maybe I just never happened to be in a posting where it was the case.

Q: What would you say was your greatest accomplishment or greatest frustration in your career?

SCHMELZER: Well, I suppose one frustration was that I didn't advance a little faster than I did. It was clear to me by the time I was 30 or 35 that I would never be ambassador to India. After I realized that I looked upon the Foreign Service as a job and not a career. I always did the best I could, but I didn't feel I had to work 105 percent of the time. I felt that 95 percent was enough.

Q: When you started out, State pretty much had the whole ball of wax. By the time you retired, you had Commerce, Treasury, the Armed Forces overseas. State was only one of a number. Did you see any change in the way State operated as a result of that? Were there things that didn't get done because of this?

SCHMELZER: I don't think I saw that where I was. For example, in Madras there was no Defense personnel. There were in Kabul, but because the DOD programs in Kabul were limited they were not throwing too much weight around. In Hong Kong, I think the same is true. I thought State held up pretty well.

Q: Do you have anything further you would like to add?

SCHMELZER: Yes. I think there is something else we should add about Hong Kong. Talk about cultural differences and some of the things that the United States is up against! In Hong Kong I knew this great guy from the Japanese Consulate. About once a month he

and I would get together for lunch to compare notes about China. I was following Chinese development of oil, coal, steel, and other resources. Takahashi was covering similar facets about China and he was extremely well informed. One day at lunch I asked him about the Japanese presence at the Canton Trade Fair, up river inside China. Twice a year there is a trade fair there, attracting multitudes of foreigners, including the Americans. In the American Consulate it would take us two or three months after the previous trade fair to produce an estimate that there had been, for example, 100 American firms there which had done about $50 million of business, and this was probably what they bought and what they sold. It was a very rough estimate of what had transpired.

On this particular occasion with Takahashi the trade fair was due to take place in about two months. So I said, “Gee, how many Japanese firms do you think might attend the next Canton trade fair?” “Oh,” he said, “3,456.” I figured he was pulling my leg but decided to go along with it. I said, “Really? How does that compare with the number that were there last time?” “Oh,” he said, “there will be 123 firms fewer.” I said, “Really? Why is that?” And then he told me why. Because in the Japanese steel industry such and such was happening, in the Japanese plastic industry this was going on, in the fishing industry this was happening. He went right down the line. On the Chinese side their basket weaving industry was doing this, their coal industry was doing this, their agricultural problems were such and such. He spoke for 15 minutes telling me precisely why the number of firms was 123 fewer and what they were going to be doing there. This was absolutely incredible because it showed the interplay between the Japanese industry, banking and government. They were so closely intertwined and so well informed and organized. Indeed, similar organization might well be illegal in the United States. In any case this was the sort of thing that we are up against. This would have been 1974, I think, when that conversation took place. You can be assured that I made a detailed report of that conversation.

Q: Anything else?

SCHMELZER: I wonder if we shouldn't say something about the Freedom of Information program in which I am now employed as a part time annuitant. I retired in 1978 and immediately went to the campus of American University where I was a full time student studying music and eventually got a Masters degree in composition. In 1981 one of my friends and former Consul General, Walter Jenkins, who was then working in this same office, suggested that this was something that I should be interested in. So I took a look at it and applied. I began working there in 1982 and have been working there ever since except for the two years that Mary Jean and I spent in Florence.

As you know, the public—journalists, historians, lawyers, members of interest groups and others—ask the Department of State for records on subjects in which they are interested. Documents responsive to these requests are located and then we review them to see if they can be released. We decide to release the documents in full or in part, to deny them, or to refer them to other agencies. This review may require coordination with bureaus within the Department, although given our own backgrounds it is assumed that we will go to the bureaus only when necessary. This background, the review process, consultation among ourselves, and the resources of the Library combine to make us fairly knowledgeable, particularly if the subject matter is several years old. If the documents are of recent origin and sensitive, it is often wise to consult the bureaus. Much of this work is interesting indeed. Sometimes you see before you confirmation of what you had long believed or suspected—e.g., we would have attacked the USSR if they had made a serious move on Berlin. Yes, agents were parachuted into a certain country during early stages of the cold war. The Department of State and our embassies are too subservient to the Israeli lobby. The USG was so deeply, extensively engaged in the internal affairs of selected other countries that even now there could be repercussions were relevant documents released.

We must also respond to the many Congressional requests for documents, and there were many such requests in 1991 and 1992. These focused on several contentious issues,

e.g., whether or not members of the Reagan election campaign made a deal with the Iranians in October, 1980 to keep the hostages beyond the election date, thus assuring President Carter's defeat (”October surprise”); the Bush administration's policy concerning Iraq in the period just before Iraq invaded Kuwait; the role of the administration concerning credits extended to Iraq by the Atlanta branch of the Banca Nazionale del Lavoro (”BNL affair”), Clark Clifford's problems with the BCCI bank, possible “coverup” by successive administration of the presumed fact that American servicemen missing in action were left behind in Vietnam and Cambodia by the Nixon administration (”MIA affair”), etc. Hopefully the number of such Congressional requests will decline now that the election is over, particularly since currently we have a backlog of some 4,300 FOIA cases.

Currently I am working on the requests of former hostage Terry Anderson, who has asked for information concerning his captors (Hezbollah), fellow hostages and documents concerning himself. I have some 5,000 documents to review. They include occasional communiqu#s issued by Hezbollah which I now read with additional interest given the recent explosion in New York. Given the need to consult with other bureaus, a cumbersome process, Anderson probably will not get much of this material in time to help with the book he's working on. Nevertheless we know that the current process of responding to FOIA requests has improved steadily, and is much better than the process extant before our separate office was created. Previously the bureaus responded to such requests, and their response was often very slow—not surprising, since the bureaus naturally have to respond to current events before they can enjoy the relative luxury of reviewing the record of years gone by.

I regret that I did not mention the damnest thing I ever saw. In India, of course: once (1954?) on the day after Diwali, a group of us went from Udaipur to Nathdwara on the only day of the year that men of the Bhil, an “untouchable” tribe, were allowed to enter the temple there. What sounds, smells, what a sight...too long to describe it. Suffice it to say that I didn't believe it was real—I kept looking around for the MGM cameras as the bodies of the dead were passed out from the temple where they had died struggling for some

of those three tons of hot rice. Or, I could mention the red rose given to son Frederick by the leader (The Mother) of the ashram in Pondicherry—did it really turn white? Or, the hillside in Afghanistan where I saw a large circle of about 100 wild donkeys braying loudly as a pair of donkeys inside the circle made love...but we don't want this to become a travelogue.

It has been an interesting life, and I am glad that I continue to be associated with the Department of State.

End of interview